DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 238 SP 037 249

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TITLE A Degree of Distinction: A Collaborative Model for Degree Delivery via Distance Education.
PUB DATE Feb 97
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (49th, Phoenix, AZ, February 26-March 1, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Literacy; Cooperative Planning; Delivery Systems; *Distance Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Masters Degrees; Program Design; *Program Development; Program Effectiveness; State Universities; *Teacher Education Programs; Teachers
IDENTIFIERS University of Montana

ABSTRACT

The University of Montana (Missoula) has developed its first electronically delivered graduate degree program. Participating in the collaborative effort are the School of Education, the Center for Continuing Education and Summer Programs, and the Higher Education Center at the Helena College of Technology of the University of Montana. The first graduate distance cohort is comprised of 30 practicing teachers who live in central and western Montana. They will be the first students to receive their complete graduate education via distance education from the School of Education at the University of Montana. Among the issues considered by the faculty in planning this program were: (1) collaborative degree design and content; (2) diverse student clientele; (3) collaborative consultation and planning; (4) faculty training and support; (5) faculty workloads; (6) university resources necessary for delivery of the program; (7) supervision of research activities and other projects; and (8) assessment of program delivery. So far, this distance graduate degree program in education has been considered a success by participating students and faculty. Problematic areas have been access to library and other resources and the variability in computer skills among students. Some program and institutional needs are: faculty development in the area of instructional design; structural and technical compatibility between the center in Helena and the main campus in Missoula; and a stable on-site coordinator. (Contains 16 references.) (SPM)

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ED 408 238

A DEGREE OF DISTINCTION: A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR DEGREE DELIVERY VIA DISTANCE EDUCATION

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A paper presented at the 49th Annual Conference
of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education
February 26-March 1, 1997
Phoenix, AZ

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A DEGREE OF DISTINCTION: A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR DEGREE DELIVERY VIA DISTANCE EDUCATION

Introduction

Currently, more than half of all institutions of higher education provide a program of distance learning to students in varying forms of continuing education, adult education, undergraduate courses, teacher training, school-to-work programs, corporate training, and contracted entrepreneurial services (Gates, 1996). While a majority of these programs have been conducted at the undergraduate level (Maxwell et al, 1995), colleges and universities are beginning to respond to mounting demands to initiate distance learning programs at the graduate level. These demands have been occasioned by the need: (1) to respond to the educational requirements of large numbers of non-traditional learners in the information age; (2) to conform to the emerging profile of students as life long learners; (3) to compete effectively for students with other distance education providers; and (4) to offer cost-effective programs that continue the traditional mission of higher education institutions amid public calls and legislative mandates for restructuring and outsourcing (Balderston, 1995; Foster, 1996a; Foster, 1996b; Parilla, 1993; Perelman, 1992).

The traditional mode of graduate education -- serving primarily on-campus, full and part time students and oriented toward residential activities of teaching, coursework, and research -- exacerbates and challenges the distance learning delivery model. A Graduate Education Task Force (1996) at The University of Montana observed that "this model , while still serving its original purposes, needs expansion as more students want

and look for an education delivered at a time and place that is available to them, and compatible with their more structured work and personal environment" (p.11).

Issues of quality student admissions and enrollments, providing traditional access to library and research facilities, supervising student work and projects, and providing meaningful faculty and peer interactions within the distance setting have surfaced as both barriers and challenges to the delivery of graduate distance learning programs (Foster, 1996b; Graduate Education Task Force, 1996; Maxwell et al, 1995; Northcott, 1987). Additionally, higher education institutions are grappling with the challenges to deliver affordable distance graduate programs to students that involve meaningful faculty governance and control, that reward faculty development and participation, and that effectively use available fiscal resources for graduate education. Indeed, as the Graduate Education Task Force (1996) at The University of Montana has noted, "Given the growing ease of use for distance learning technologies, it is likely that institutions and programs will also need to offer truly joint and integrated graduate programs. This approach will be economically advantageous because it will make use of the infrastructure investments on multiple campuses while combining the faculty strengths of diverse programs" (p.12).

This paper will explore the unique collaboration between three units at The University of Montana---School of Education (Departments of Educational Leadership and Counseling and Curriculum and Instruction), The Center for Continuing Education and Summer Programs (herein referred to as the Center), and the Higher Education Center at the Helena College of Technology of The University of Montana---in developing

a program of delivery for the School of Education's first electronically delivered graduate degree program to western and central Montana. Issues of collaborative degree design and content relative to the diverse student clientele being served, the collaborative consultation and planning of faculty from two different departments within the School of Education at The University of Montana, faculty training and support for distance instruction, faculty workloads, and university resources necessary for delivery of the program will be addressed.

Background: University Restructuring and Distance Education, Collaborative Degree Delivery and Infrastructure, and Collaborative Degree Design

Restructuring of the Montana State University System and Distance Education

Structural reorganization of the Montana State University System, effected in January, 1994, through administrative merger, has resulted in a single unified state system composed of two comprehensive doctoral universities (The University of Montana at Missoula and Montana State University at Bozeman), four (four year) administratively merged colleges (Northern Montana College-MSU, Montana State University-Billings, Western Montan College-UM, and Montana Tech-UM), two higher education centers (Helena, Montana and Great Falls, Montana), and five former vocational-technical institutions as colleges of technology. Restructuring of the Montana State University System has highlighted the efficacy of information technologies and the need to make all academic programs available to citizens of the state at times and places conducive to their professional and family obligations.

Distance courses and academic programs within the Montana State University System have been offered via METNET (Montana Educational Television Network), the state's interactive compressed two way audio and video system. This network is installed at fourteen sites across the state. Individual campuses have made use of the system to varying degrees.

The delivery of distance courses and graduate degree programs at The University of Montana has been facilitated through the cooperative and collaborative planning efforts of the Center and constituent graduate units at the main campus in Missoula. The Center has provided and facilitated the necessary infrastructure and planning for delivery of graduate degree programs via a distance format, and cooperating graduate departments have provided the faculty resource base and programmatic control and expertise needed to deliver accredited programs. Concomitantly, the Center has played an important and vital role in operationalizing the higher education centers at Helena and Great Falls by working with campus officials at these sites to provide access to all resources of The University of Montana for ongoing professional development courses and graduate degree programs.

Collaborative Degree Delivery and Infrastructure: The Master of Education Degree

An assessment by the Center of the postgraduate educational needs of school personnel in western and central Montana, specifically focused in rural populated areas around Helena, Montana, evidenced a need for graduate education in advanced pedagogy and technology (Curriculum and Instruction) for classroom teachers and graduate education for school personnel contemplating careers in educational administration and

supervision (Educational Leadership). Enrollments to sustain two distinct graduate degree programs that would fulfill the university system restructuring mandate for program accessibility and that would meet the programmatic graduate emphasis of school personnel in the region "at a distance" proved to be insufficient.

A venture to address the postgraduate needs of school personnel in rural central and western Montana was initiated in the 1994 fall semester by the Center with the dean of the School of Education (The University of Montana), the leadership (chairs) of the departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Leadership and Counseling, and the combined faculties of each department. Through a succession of plenary meetings and departmental deliberations conducted during the 1994-95 academic year by the faculties of the two departments, a cooperative degree program, combining the essential programmatic elements from each academic area, was designed. Delivery of the distance Master of Education degree program at the higher education center at Helena, Montana, commenced in the 1995 fall semester.

The Graduate Education Task Force (1996) at The University of Montana has carefully noted that "without the necessary technological infrastructure, it is impossible to serve students, either on or off campus, through distributed delivery systems" (p.9). Infrastructure for this collaborative program is provided by the Center through the interactive use of human and technological resources. An Extern Graduate Program Officer, working out of the Center, is entrusted with the tasks of "development and implementation of all the logistics associated with each course offering; interfacing with institutional representatives from the higher education center, academic coordinators, and

faculty from the School of Education; monitoring all student services to ensure that they are working appropriately, assisting with financial aid problems, course evaluation distribution and analysis; and a variety of student concerns" (Kindrick et al, 1996, p.6). The academic and regulatory integrity of the degree program is ensured through the work of two academic coordinators from each department who are cooperatively responsible for all academic aspects of the program, including review of graduate applications, admissions recommendations, student advisement according to programmatic emphasis (classroom and/or school leadership), and identification of all instructional personnel within the School of Education.

Tenured and tenure track faculty from each of the cooperating departments comprise the instructional staff for the distance graduate degree program. An important programmatic aspect of this degree program is that faculty are encouraged to team teach within the identified themes of the instructional program in order to model collaborative professional interaction and outcomes and to provide a knowledge base and environment for student exchanges, exclusive of program emphasis (teaching or administration).

Participation by faculty in the distance graduate program is on a voluntary basis. Faculty who teach in the program may select from two faculty workload options: (1) teach a course that is part of the program as part of the regular faculty load assigned by the core department, or (2) teach a course that is part of the program as "extra to regular faculty load" and receive additional remuneration based upon an agreed upon faculty salary scale financed by the Center. The Center remunerates the department whose faculty may chose to teach a course as part of the regular faculty load in order to provide a "buy-out" for

that faculty member from regularly assigned campus courses. This remuneration includes a fee that goes directly to the faculty member for the development of the new distance-formatted course. Faculty members who select to teach in the program as "extra to faculty load" execute a contract with the Center for the teaching of the scheduled course. These faculty members are not exempt from regular campus assignments.

Three interactive delivery systems are being utilized in the electronic transmission of courses to students at the higher education center in Helena, Montana. These systems include: (1) METNET, the State of Montana's two way compressed interactive video system; (2) PictureTel, a desktop videoconferencing system that enables students and faculty to interact via audio, video, and software sharing applications; and (3) ProShare, an interactive Windows based communication network for sharing applications and documents between faculty and students (Kindrick et al, 1996).

Specific student services include: distance registration, library access, establishment and maintenance of E-mail accounts, and delivery of course files and hand-outs. Internet and data based networks have provided access for students to the main library on the campus of The University of Montana at Missoula through "GRIZNET", to interlibrary loan services through the Montana State University System, to CARL Uncover (1700 publications with document delivery), and to the Montana State Library. Arrangements at the local level in Helena, Montana, have also enabled students to access the library at Carroll College, a private Catholic four year liberal arts institution, and the services of the Helena Public Library. Access to faculty is facilitated via telephone, E-mail,

and fax machine during regularly scheduled office hours on the campus of the University of Montana.

Collaborative Degree Design: Programmatic Development

The cooperative design of this degree program provides academic content and structure that is beneficial to the attainment of the professional goals outlined by the graduate students. The "cohort nature" of degree delivery is attuned to the needs for supportive and professional development and provides a support system for student persistence and completion of the program (Reynolds, 1993; Roberts, 1993).

Development of this collaborative distance graduate degree program is organized by the School of Education under its NCATE accredited degree program in Curriculum Studies, a degree granting program operated under the auspices of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Course work for the degree is comprised of essential courses from the departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Leadership and Counseling that provide a pedagogical and/or administrative emphasis for students. Academic work from this degree program can be applied toward advanced teacher certification and school administrator licensure in the State of Montana. Thirty-seven (37) graduate semester credits and a written comprehensive examination are required for the degree. Course work is delivered over six semesters. Because of the professional design and cohort nature of this degree program, students are not permitted to transfer credits into the program. Six graduate semester credits (two cross listed courses -EDLD/C&I) are offered one night a week (on Tuesday by agreement of the members of the graduate

cohort) from 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. at the higher education center in Helena, Montana. Students complete a comprehensive examination immediately folllowing the last course of the program.

Course work for the degree is designed around six instructional themes that have been determined by the two cooperating departments within the School of Education to provide a basis for the development of the "professional conversation" among educators. This programmatic framework for graduate education of teachers and administrators has been cited as a basis for substantive reform and restructuring in contemporary education (Boyd, 1996; Louis et al, 1996a). Following is the programmatic and timeline framework that is being followed by the first cohort group:

Semester I (Fall '95): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Evolution of the Curriculum and Instruction Process

C&I/EDLD 504 History of American Education (3)
C&I.EDLD 551 Foundations of Curriculum and Instruction (3)

Semester 2 (Spring '96): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Instructional Design and Technology Planning

C&I/EDLD 515 Computer and Technological Applications in Education (3)
C&I/EDLD 595 Strategic Planning for Technology (3)

Semester 3 (Summer '96): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Program Evaluation and Continuous Renewal

C&I/EDLD 520 Research and Program Evaluation (3)
EDLD 550 Foundations of Educational Leadership (3)

Semester 4 (Fall '96): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Special Education and Law

C&I 518	Inclusion and Collaboration (3)
EDLD 554	School Law (3)

Semester 5 (Spring '97): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Learning and Support Systems

C&I 652	Issues in Curriculum and Instruction (3)
Counseling 565	School Counseling, Program Development and Supervision (3)

Semester 6 (Summer I '97): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Cross-Cultural Issues and Diversity

C&I 514	Education Across Cultures (3)
EDLD 552	Supervision and Evaluation of Public School Educators (3)

Semester 6 (Summer II '97): 1 Graduate Credit

Theme: Comprehensive Examination

C&I/EDLD 596	Comprehensive Examination (1)

Cohort I Profile and Assessment of Program Delivery: Supervision, Access, and Face to Face Interaction

Profile of Cohort I

Thirty (30) practicing teachers who work and live in western and central Montana comprise the graduate distance Cohort One group of students. These teachers work in elementary, middle, and secondary schools in central and western Montana. Fourteen (14) students are pursuing a programmatic emphasis in Educational Leadership that will prepare them as school administrators. Sixteen (16) students are pursuing an emphasis in Curriculum and Instruction. This cohort of students represents the first group of graduate

students who will have received their complete graduate education via distance from the School of Education at The University of Montana. Instructional facilities for this degree program are situated at the higher education center at the Helena College of Technology of the University of Montana (Helena, MT).

Assessment of Program Delivery

Maxwell et al (1995) have identified three critical components of post-baccalaureate programs that must be considered in assessing the successful delivery of graduate distance programs. These components include: (1) close supervision of research projects; (2) access to library and other resources; and (3) face to face interaction with faculty and peers. Additionally, effectively delivered graduate programs use a combination of media to support the teaching and learning dynamics so essential to distance learning. Multi-media systems include: (1) video and teleconferencing; (2) computer-mediated communication; and (3) text-based materials (paper and electronic copies).

Close Supervision of Research Activities and Other Projects

Research projects and activities have been integral to the distance courses of this degree program. Faculty have taken great pains to guard the integrity of this aspect of the program. Because of the professional and practitioner orientations of this graduate degree program, faculty have been able to dialogue with students about problems related to their working environments and have been able to direct students to research sources and avenues that both inform and expand their professional practices. Additionally, this one-

on-one dialogue has been efficacious to the development of research based projects that have been supportive and informative to current educational initiatives in the school districts where some teachers are currently employed. Cooperative learning activities which involve an extrapolation of extant research and practice have been hallmarks in the area of action research in this program. Additionally, students will be required to complete a six hour comprehensive examination as part of the requirements for graduation from this program. This comprehensive examination will test student knowledge and an understanding and application of both research and practitioner issues. Provision for guidance and direction in preparing for the comprehensive examination is made through a one credit course that is part of the program design. The two academic coordinators will provide the instructional perspectives and practices necessary to acculturate students to the examination process. This acculturation process takes place during Semester 5 of the program through specified practice sessions conducted by the departmental coordinators at the higher education center in Helena, Montana. Students will take this examination at the higher education center and will be proctored by the program's two departmental academic coordinators. Readers of the comprehensive examination will be comprised of representatives from the two cooperating academic departments. Each examination will be read and scored by three faculty members.

Access to Library and Other Resources

Access to library and other resources in a timely and efficient manner has been problematic for a number of reasons. First, levels of computer literacy among students has

varied from "little and no skill" to a "running personal knowledge" of applications and practices. Equalizing the competency levels of students sufficient to access information has been an on-going development within the program and varied levels of positive success have been experienced among cohort members. Students have received support instruction from the Center in establishing E-mail accounts and from library personnel at the higher education center in accessing information and materials through GRIZNET, the university data-based system, CARL Uncover, and interlibrary loan. Surprisingly, but not unexpected, some students have pursued independent means to access materials and to connect with faculty as well. These independent means have included the purchase of computers and software that have linked them to other educational data bases and various networks. Interlibrary loan privileges are available to students and most make good use of this service; however, because of time factors involved in this process, students have, on occasion, come to the main campus in Missoula to access materials that have been difficult to acquire through interlibrary loan and data-based services (driving time can average about two and a half hours to Missoula). Aware of the difficulties inherent in assessing particular research information in a timely fashion, faculty members have been adept at developing course packs that include information that each student must have in order to complete certain class requirements. The use of copying and fax transmission has also aided the research efforts of students.

A second point of impact in providing access to library materials involves the "facilities readiness" of the higher education center. Designated as a "higher education" center by the university restructuring initiative but serving primarily as a two year

commuter institution on a regular basis, the higher education center at Helena has had to realign its working culture and schedule to provide appropriate access to physical facilities on dates and at times convenient to distance graduate students. On a sporadic basis, the Center has provided the services of an on-site coordinator to interface with personnel in Helena in the scheduling and use of facilities and equipment. Greater and more stable use of a site coordinator is anticipated in the future as more distance programs emanate from the higher education center. And thirdly, cost factors associated with the delivery of this program at the higher education center remain a contentious issue because of the impact upon the site and upon equipment and personnel uses (self-supported programs versus state support for distance delivery).

Face to Face Interaction with Faculty and Peers

The cohort design of this program and both the asynchronous computer mediated and synchronous-interactive nature of delivery provide a forum for challenging and meaningful interaction between students and faculty. Students have communicated a need to "connect physically" with their departmental academic advisor, the extern graduate program officer, and with faculty members at least one or twice a semester to make the synchronous interaction during the semester appear "reality based". Additionally, because of the nature of some course content and the skill building required for some classes, some faculty have found that a division of 60 to 70 percent of "synchronous contact" and 30 to 40 percent of "physical availability at the site" makes for a more effective instructional arrangement.

A PostScript "At a Distance"

Thirty students commenced this distance graduate degree program in Education from the School of Education at the University of Montana as Cohort I, and the same 30 remain currently enrolled in the program, with completion of the program scheduled for Summer, 1997.

Participating faculty members have broadened and expanded their knowledge and understanding of the uses of information technology as a teaching tool. Faculty have experienced the inevitable breakdown in the electronic connection between themselves and students that, technologically speaking, can be attributed to a number of technical anomalies. Such circumstances have increased a higher level of patience and forbearance in faculty who are working with sophisticated technological systems for the first time, and many faculty have become adept at preparing for such disconnections in a way that does not interrupt the overall learning goals of the instruction at a given time. Importantly, many faculty have incorporated teaching and learning tools utilized in their distance-formatted classes into their own campus courses. Other faculty members in the School of Education who wish to participate in this mode of graduate education have come to a realization that they must equip themselves with the competencies and skills necessary to function effectively in this technology driven format of instruction.

Students have appreciated the opportunity to study at a time and place conducive to their family, professional, and work obligations. They have appreciated the "cohort nature" of the distance delivery as a means of providing both personal and professional

supports, as well as providing a forum for cooperative and collaborative learning activities. Students have tolerated and have been gracious in their acceptance of technological goofs and interruptions, and they have allowed faculty and Center staff to chart their reactions as part of on-going research to perfect delivery of the program in the future. In fact, students have commented that they have grown in their own appreciation and realization of the utility, capacities, and limitations of technology, yet remain positive and open to the limitless possibilities for their own learning and that of their students through this mode of instruction. Many of their own personal understandings and competencies in using technology have been enhanced and expanded, and many have taken on leadership roles in their own working environments in advocating the greater use of information technologies for student learning. Critically important, many of the students in this program have become visible and vocal advocates to their peers of the success of this form of degree delivery.

Institutional deficiencies have become readily apparent through this instructional delivery mode. First, ongoing faculty development in the area of instructional design must be consistent with the needs of faculty who will be participating in this program. Secondly, infrastructure at the higher education center in Helena must become more structurally and technically compatible with that of the main campus in Missoula in order to facilitate effective instructional and administrative services for students. And thirdly, the need for an stable on-site coordinator to facilitate both institutional and instructional activities is crucial to the greater overall effectiveness of the program. These issues have been noted

and a deliberate and focused effort has been made to remedy these issues in order to ensure the success of both faculty and students. Cohort II beings Fall semester, 1997.

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